

Civil War Book Review

Spring 2005

Article 18

Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South

Rod Andrew Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Andrew, Rod Jr. (2005) "Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss2/18>

Review

Andrew Jr., Rod

Spring 2005

Pace, Robert F. *Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South*. Louisiana State University Press, \$34.95 ISBN 807129828

Principle and folly

College men balanced mischief with Southern nobility

Robert F. Pace, Professor of History at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas, has produced a delightful book that enriches our understanding of male student life in antebellum southern colleges. Pace pursues a discrete, precisely defined goal, described on page 8 as understanding the culture of being a college student in the Old South. He neither discusses nor claims to offer new insights on curricular issues, the role of higher education in molding southern society, or the development of higher education in the region and the nation. The focus instead is on how societal norms shaped the college experience and personal development of the young men attending southern colleges.

Two themes drive Pace's description of antebellum student life. The first, and apparently the most important to Pace, is honor. The second is adolescent development, as the average age of southern college freshmen was fifteen. It is clear that the two themes are intricately related, alternately colliding with and reinforcing the other.

In his use of honor, Pace relies heavily on the works of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Kenneth Greenberg, and Peter Bardaglio. Honor, in other words, was an ethical system that demanded white men give the appearance that they possessed integrity, a sense of duty, respect for peers, independence of action, and social power. Pace makes it clear throughout the book, and especially on page 4, that it was the public appearance of possessing those qualities that was most important, not the reality. Honor, in other words, was often a mask of respectability that young southern white men, especially while in college, learned to wear properly.

While learning how to conduct themselves according to society's adult male code of honor, southern boys were also negotiating the difficult transition from childhood to manhood. Sometimes this involved creating rules of mutual obligations for themselves within the campus setting, such as in literary and debating societies, to demonstrate their coming of age in the world of honor. Meanwhile they frequently engaged in childish, or adolescent, forms of behavior not normally considered honorable in the adult world. Consequently, these young men often felt compelled to wear the masks of honorable gentlemen even as they committed or defended acts of defiance and indiscretion that were essentially childish pranks. A silly college prank, for example, could lead to disciplinary action by campus authorities. The students, interpreting the punishment as an insult to their status as honorable gentlemen, felt compelled to stand collectively with their classmates and resist the faculty, president, or trustees. Admittedly, Pace makes this story sound much more lively and fascinating than this summary can.

With the help of student diaries and letters, and occasionally faculty sources, the author effectively uses these two themes--honor and adolescence--to relate and analyze countless aspects of college life in the Old South. He discusses hardships such as illness, fire, homesickness, rustic quarters, and bad food; adolescent experimentation with alcohol, tobacco, gambling, courting, and illicit sex; and other issues including relations with slave servants, dress, campus violence, and asking for money from home. The bulk of his primary material comes from the University of North Carolina and the University of Virginia, but Pace has done impressive research in manuscript collections from more than a dozen other schools from across the South, including both state institutions and private colleges.

This book does suffer from Pace's restricted scope of inquiry. First, while Pace argues persuasively for the formative influence of honor (in the definition currently in vogue in the works of Greenberg and Wyatt-Brown) he diminishes the importance of competing value systems on college youth. He does explain that southern students' notions of honor often collided with the values of northern-educated faculty and college presidents. The latter typically valued Puritanical reserve, introspection, study, and self-control as opposed to southern self-assertion, ostentatious display, and the desire for public acclaim. Pace does not take this idea very far, however, preferring to dwell almost exclusively on the impact of honor on college youth.

Second, except for a few brief references to Virginia Military Institute and to military training during the Civil War years, Pace pays almost no attention to military education in the South. Military colleges were a major part of the educational landscape of the antebellum South, a fact that further distinguishes the South from the antebellum North. Nearly every southern state had at least one state-supported military college by the end of the antebellum period, and there were literally scores of private military colleges. If Pace had looked closely at these institutions, he may have found that their southern professors, trustees, and presidents--not to mention parents and legislators--also reacted against the ostentatious display, violent behavior, and excessive individualism that seemed to characterize southern youth. He would have found other differences as well. Not all southern college youth could preen in expensive clothing, seek comfortable lodging in town, or carouse in taverns whenever they wished as many of Pace's subjects did. They instead wore uniforms, lived in Spartan barracks, and flouted college rules at much greater risk.

Third, Pace's dependence on honor as an analytical concept may lead him to overstate the Civil War's transforming effect on the honor code, as well as how abruptly southern college life changed after 1865. As Pace tells it on page 117, when the dominant southern culture came tumbling down at the hands of Federal troops, college life in the South fell with it. The honor ethic was so transformed that college life in the South would never be the same again. Pace admits that many changes did not occur overnight, but other current scholarship tends to suggest that southern students around the turn of the twentieth century often acted upon the demands of honor in ways that were not that very different from their antebellum predecessors. As late as the 1910s, for example, student rebellions or walkouts resulted largely from students' sense that the president or faculty had violated their sense of honor, or claims to status as honorable men. Pace's heavy reliance on Greenberg and Wyatt-Brown could be problematic in a broad analytic sense as well. If a new generation of scholarship were to come along that significantly complicated our understanding of antebellum southern mores or challenged the current understanding of honor, much of Pace's contribution would be diminished.

This sounds like a lot of criticism, but it is not meant to undermine the very real significance of this work. Pace has written a highly readable and engaging book. It rests on significant primary research. It enriches our understanding of college student life, updating and contextualizing what we know from E. Merton

Coulter's *College Life in the Old South*, and provides an interesting corrective to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. It will prove indispensable to scholars working in this field, and enjoyable and enlightening to many others.

Rod Andrew Jr. is an assistant professor of history at Clemson University. He is the author of Long Gray Lines: The Southern Military School Tradition, 1839-1915 (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001).